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# Senior Health and Wellness Newsletter

Kentucky Department for Aging and Independent Living

## Toothbrushing: Good for Your Health

Brushing your teeth at least two times a day (morning and night) is a cornerstone of good oral healthcare. Along with flossing at least once a day to clean between the teeth, toothbrushing is a key in the prevention of periodontal (gum) disease.

Periodontal disease is very common in adults. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), roughly 50% of American adults over 30 have periodontal disease. That figure goes up to 70% for adults over 65, according to a recent study in the *Journal of Dental Research* by P.I. Eke and others. Also, periodontal disease is a contributing factor leading to an increased risk and development of poor diabetes control, aspiration pneumonia, stroke and other conditions.

This article will review what you can do to develop an effective toothbrushing technique for good oral hygiene and to help prevent periodontal disease. It is part of a series on Preventive Oral Health.

### Periodontal Disease (Gum Disease)

Periodontal disease may be classified as either Gingivitis or Periodontitis. Gingivitis may be thought of as the mildest form of periodontal disease. At this stage, the gums (gingiva) are often characterized by a red appearance and swelling. They often bleed easily on brushing, flossing or probing by a dental hygienist or dentist. The good news is that, at this point in the periodontal disease process, the condition is reversible.

The advanced form of gum disease, Periodontitis, is characterized by a loss of bony support around the teeth. This situation is similar to what happens when the foundation of a house gets washed away during a flood. The bony and tissue support surrounding the teeth is lost due to the inflammation/infection process. Periodontal pockets may develop which are difficult to keep clean. Periodontal Sur-



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gery and/or non-surgical treatments may then be required for the patient's gums to be returned to a state where they may be taken care of through normal brushing and flossing.

### Toothbrush Bristle Texture

A key to developing good tooth brushing habits is to have the right type of toothbrush. A good toothbrush has bristles that are polished and made of nylon or a nylon blend. People should only use soft or extra soft toothbrushes. Using medium and hard toothbrushes can cause the position of the gums around the teeth to recede creating a condition known as gingival recession. Gingival recession can lead to more serious periodontal (gum) problems. In addition, hard and medium toothbrushes may cause excessive wearing away of the tooth itself.

### Toothbrush Size and Angle

People often think that a large size toothbrush head is the best for cleaning but this may not be the case, especially for children, adolescents, and people with small mouths. In these situations, a toothbrush with a smaller head size may be more efficient to use.

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The angle of the toothbrush head is another factor to consider when selecting a toothbrush. Many people find the use of a toothbrush with a head angled like the head of a dental instrument allows for easier positioning and use in difficult to reach areas of the mouth. Toothbrush heads are also available in a variety of shapes and bristle patterns which may conform better to tooth surfaces.

### **Toothbrush Type and Replacement**

Toothbrushes have been introduced recently which indicate, through a color change, when it is time to change the toothbrush. This feature, while not necessary, may prove convenient and helpful for some people. Toothbrushes should be replaced when the bristles of the toothbrush become flared, frayed or bent. This frequently happens in 3-4 months or less.

**Should you use a Manual or Mechanical type of toothbrush?** A person can do a good job brushing their teeth with either type of toothbrush. However, a mechanical brush may prove easier and more efficient to use for some people. This would include people such as those with limited hand use or agility due to a history of strokes or other conditions.

### **Toothbrushing Technique**

A person should take at least one minute (preferably 2 minutes) to brush all teeth in the mouth. For efficiency, a routine should be developed so that a person adequately brushes all of his or her teeth efficiently during a brushing session. One way to help accomplish this is to divide the teeth of the mouth into four equal parts. This will create a right and left side to the upper arch of teeth and a right and left side to the lower arch.

Starting with the right side of the upper arch, spend at least 15 seconds (30 seconds for each side of the arch is better) brushing the outer, inner and top (biting) surfaces of the teeth, stopping on a tooth close to the middle of the upper lip. Next, brush the remaining 1/2 of the teeth in the upper arch (left side) for 15 seconds. The next step is to brush the teeth in the left half of the lower arch for 15 seconds followed by the teeth of the right half of the lower arch for 15 seconds.

It is important to develop a good brushing technique which is easily repeatable. People should visit a Dentist regularly for an oral examination (check-up) and cleaning. Every six months is a common schedule however, depending on a person's particular oral health status and needs, it may be more or less than every six months. The check-up is an excellent time to review brushing technique with your Dentist or Dental Hygienist.

**Remember:** If a good toothbrushing technique is used with the wrong type of toothbrush, the teeth and gums can still be harmed. Good technique and using the correct type of toothbrush are two keys to good oral care.

### **For more information on tooth brushing and other oral health topics visit:**

- American Dental Association website: [www.ada.org](http://www.ada.org) or [www.mouthhealthy.org](http://www.mouthhealthy.org)
- American Academy of Periodontology website: [www.perio.org](http://www.perio.org)
- Manual versus powered toothbrushing for oral health (Review) The Cochrane Library 2009, Issue 1 <http://www.thecochranelibrary.com>

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